UNITED
NATIONS

A

General Assembly

Distr.
GENERAL

A/51/253
25 July 1996

ORIGINAL: ENGLISH

Fifty-first session
Item 120 of the provisional agenda*

PATTERN OF CONFERENCES

Measures to enhance utilization of conference services: results of the active dialogue between Conference Services and the substantive secretariats of intergovernmental bodies

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. At its substantive session of 1995, the Committee on Conferences requested Conference Services to maintain an active dialogue with the substantive secretariats of intergovernmental bodies, providing statistics and information on previous performance, as well as guidelines on ways and means to enhance utilization of conference-servicing resources, and to report on the outcome of that dialogue to the General Assembly at its fifty-first session, through the Committee on Conferences.

2. In addition, in paragraph 9 of its resolution 50/206 A of 23 December 1995, the General Assembly requested the Secretariat to take the measures recommended by the Committee on Conferences to enhance utilization of conference-servicing resources and to report thereon to the Assembly at its fifty-first session through the Committee.

II. NEW YORK

3. With a view to meeting the foregoing requests of the General Assembly and the Committee on Conferences, a series of active dialogues was held on 30 January, 19 March and 24 May 1996 with the substantive secretariats of all

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intergovernmental bodies meeting in New York in 1996, including sessional bodies meeting from January to September, as well as the Security Council and its subsidiary bodies and the subsidiary bodies of the General Assembly that meet on an ongoing basis. It is expected that consultations will also be held with the secretaries of the Main Committees of the General Assembly.

4. At the three aforementioned meetings, Conference Services provided statistics on the bodies concerned and information on their previous performance, as well as guidelines on ways and means to enhance utilization of conference-servicing resources. Information was also provided on control and limitation of documentation and the equal treatment of all official languages, including the relevant resolutions and rules on the matter and recommendations for complying with them. In addition, the provisions of General Assembly resolutions 40/243 of 18 December 1985 and 50/206 of 23 December 1995 were reviewed in detail. The participants were informed that, if so requested, a representative of Conference Services would be available to advise the bureaux of intergovernmental bodies or the bodies themselves on any conference-servicing matter at the outset of their sessions.

5. Clarification was sought and received from Conference Services on a number of conference-servicing issues of concern to the representatives of the substantive secretariats present at the consultations. In that regard, Conference Services explained that late starts and early adjournments of meetings were a principal cause of underutilization, particularly in the Main Committees of the General Assembly.

6. Several statistics-related queries were raised. In clarifying those matters, Conference Services explained that, for statistical purposes, credit was given to bodies that reported cancellations sufficiently in advance that their services could be reassigned to other bodies. However, credit was not posted in the event that such services were not reassigned and, in any event, there was no justification for giving credit to bodies that were assigned the unutilized resources of other bodies. It was clearly not necessarily a boon to Conference Services that some bodies completed their work ahead of schedule. What would indeed be useful was for bodies realistically to assess their need for resources during the planning stage and to shorten their sessions if possible.

7. With regard to bodies that required time to draft their reports during sessions, Conference Services recommended that they should not schedule meetings when drafting was planned so as to avoid being penalized for cancellations.

8. In addition, it was explained that the current financial situation of the Organization simply did not make it possible to accommodate extended afternoon meetings or night meetings. Moreover, authorization would continue to be required for resumed, extended or parallel meetings, indeed, for any meetings not budgeted in the calendar. Conference Services must be informed of any proposal concerning change of dates, additional sessions or change of entitlements of the body in session, as well as any proposal concerning the establishment of new bodies.

9. Of particular concern to several participants was the response of some delegations and bodies to cost-saving measures. For example, some secretaries reported that, in spite of their explanations, the bodies they represented had requested to extend their sessions, convene night meetings and receive other services. Other secretaries reported that while delegates as individuals appreciated the need for restraint in requesting meetings and documentation, the bodies of which they were members continued to make unrealistic requests for services.

10. As to documentation, Conference Services urged the representatives of the substantive secretariats to inform rapporteurs and drafters about the rules and regulations on control and limitation of documentation, particularly those concerning page limits.

11. A suggestion was made to Conference Services to update notional costs of documentation and meeting time. The Director of Conference Services transmitted a memorandum to the secretaries of all intergovernmental bodies informing them about the measures contained in General Assembly resolution 50/206 C and about current estimates of the notional costs of different conference services. For one body, that information was issued in a note by the Secretariat. Moreover, at the request of Conference Services, at the 105th plenary meeting of the General Assembly, on 15 April 1996, the Acting President read out an announcement in which he drew attention to resolution 50/206 C on measures related to control and limitation of documentation, and to the costs of meeting servicing and documentation processing (see A/50/PV.105, pp. 20 and 21).

12. In his memorandum, the Director of Conference Services also requested the secretaries to transmit to him any information on action taken by the bodies concerned in connection with General Assembly resolution 50/206 C. In reply, the secretaries of several bodies reported that they had brought to the attention of the members the information about control and limitation of documentation and costs of meetings and documentation. Some secretaries noted that the bodies they represented had reduced the number of reports requested for the following session and streamlined the format of their reports. One body had considerably reduced the number of draft resolutions tabled at its recent substantive session.

13. It was also suggested that the Director of Conference Services should transmit a note to all secretaries of intergovernmental bodies highlighting information on conference services that would be of use to delegations. The requested information is being prepared for circulation prior to the fifty-first session of the General Assembly.

14. In conclusion, emphasis during the three consultations held in New York was placed on the need for secretaries regularly to apprise their bodies of the critical financial situation of the Organization and of the inevitable consequences it had for the provision of conference services. It was agreed that intergovernmental bodies should realistically reassess their need for meeting and documentation services in the light of the cost-saving measures taken by the Organization.

III. GENEVA

15. Consultations were also held between the Conference Services Division and the substantive secretariats of intergovernmental bodies meeting at the United Nations Office at Geneva. In that context, Conference Services provided guidelines on ways and means to enhance utilization of conference-servicing resources and information on control and limitation of documentation, including the relevant resolutions and rules on the matter and recommendations for complying with them.

16. As in New York, emphasis was placed on the principal causes of underutilization, that is, late starts and early adjournments of meetings, as well as cancellations of meetings where resources could not be reassigned to another body. Conference Services encouraged the bodies concerned to assess their need for conference-servicing resources with a view to shortening their sessions if possible.

17. With regard to documentation, Conference Services reviewed the rules and regulations on control and limitation of documentation and urged the representatives of the substantive secretariats concerned to inform rapporteurs and drafters about such policy.

18. As a result of the ongoing consultations on utilization of conference-servicing resources at Geneva, at least one intergovernmental body, which over the years had had a particularly low utilization factor, made considerable progress in the first half of 1996.

IV. VIENNA

19. On 21 March 1996, the Director of the Division of Administrative and Common Services convened a meeting with the Secretaries of intergovernmental bodies based at the United Nations Office at Vienna and the policy-making bodies of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO), with a view to apprising them of the requests referred to in paragraphs 1 and 2 of the present report and, in particular, of the General Assembly resolutions on utilization of conference-servicing resources and control and limitation of documentation. Representatives of the Translation and Editorial Service and of the Interpretation and Meetings Service also participated at the meeting.

20. A note summarizing the various issues was circulated to participants which underscored the importance of complying with the rules and regulations on control and limitation of documentation, of planning requested resources accurately and, if necessary, of providing sufficient notice of cancellation of services to the Interpretation and Meetings Service.

21. A lengthy discussion took place that focused on ways and means of making the most cost-effective use possible of reduced conference resources.

22. As a result of the consultations held at Vienna, a note to secretaries of meetings is being updated which will be transmitted to them during the planning stage with a view to highlighting the following issues: the number of copies of

documents distributed should be reduced and pre-session documents should not be redistributed; meetings cannot be extended without the approval of the General Assembly; cancellation of interpretation services once contracts have been issued to interpreters is costly for the Organization.

23. In addition, a focal point has been designated in UNIDO with whom representatives of the Interpretation and Meetings Service can discuss all issues related to the servicing of UNIDO meetings.

24. In the course of the active dialogue, it was suggested that such informal meetings as consultations with permanent missions scheduled by the substantive secretariats prior to sessions of intergovernmental bodies, which are serviced on an "as available" basis, should be coordinated sufficiently in advance with the Interpretation and Meetings Service to ensure that, whenever possible, the same room, staff and interpretation resources were used on a particular day. That proposal was approved and has been implemented.

25. Such an action is meaningful in the context of Vienna, as there are few half-day meetings entitled to interpretation services, even on an "as available" basis. The scheduling of two such meetings well in advance for a day when there is little activity makes it possible to enhance utilization of limited in-house interpretation and conference-room resources.